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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a basic philosophical issue involved with the purpose of a senior capstone communication course required of all majors. The issue involves two opposites: closure, represented by the dome, and further exploration, represented by the spire. Both approaches have legitimate claims for a capstone course. There is definitely a need for students to be able to pull together ideas presented in different courses and construct some sort of integrated, meaningful whole. No other single course is traditionally involved in this specific purpose, with the possible exception of communication theory. This "tying together" process only serves to make sense of the discipline, but also serves as a path to ownership of the major. Yet the college major is not, and should not be, the end of intellectual growth. To some degree each student must be equipped and readied to launch out into new endeavors, using the college learning experience as a base. Learning is often said to raise more questions than it answers, and these questions will multiply as the graduate moves out from the academy. If people are forced to chose between closure or further exploration, perhaps the answer is dependent on the curricular configuration of each major program. (Contains 36 references.) (Author/CR)

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THE SENIOR CAPSTONE, DOME OR SPIRE?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a basic philosophical issue involved with the purpose of a senior capstone communication course required of all majors. This issue involves two opposites: closure, represented by the dome, and further exploration, represented by the spire. Both poles have legitimate claims for a capstone course.

There is definitely a need for students to be able to pull together all the ideas presented in different courses and construct some sort of integrated, meaningful whole. No other single course is traditionally involved in this specific purpose, with the possible exception of communication theory. This "tying together" process not only serves to make sense of the discipline, but also serves as a path to ownership of the major. Yet, the college major is not, and should not be, the end of intellectual growth. To some degree each student must be equipped and readied to launch out into new endeavors, using the college learning experience as a base. Learning is often said to raise more questions than it answers, and these questions will multiply as the graduate moves out from the academy.

So, what should be the emphasis of a capstone course, closure or further exploration? Can they both reasonably be accomplished in the time allotted? Since these goals seem to move in opposite directions, is one canceled out by including the other? If we are forced to chose between the two, which should be emphasized? Perhaps the answer to these questions and others is dependent on the curricular configuration of each major program.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education published their school-shaking report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. Immediately, other educational bureaucracies took their cue and launched into various critical studies of their own. One of these organizations was the Association of American Colleges (AAC). In 1985 they issued their *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community* in which they identified "the decay in college course of study and the role of the faculty in creating and nurturing that decay" (p. 1). Shortly, thereafter followed a series of further reports (1989, 1991a, 1991b) which set the stage for a nation-wide scramble among colleges to install "gateway courses" and "capstone courses." Part of the original *Integrity* report called for majors to have "a beginning, a middle, and an end--each contributing in a different but specific way to the overall aim of the major" (Wanenaar, 1993, p. 210). What better way to ensure a definite end than have a "capstone course"?

Consequently, in recent years there has been a rush to install "capstone" courses as part of the curriculum of most college majors. According to Durel (1993), "the capstone course typically is defined as a crowning course or experience coming at the end of a sequence of courses with the specific objective of *integrating* a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole (p. 223). Yet, even under such a definition, there are a wide variety of courses being taught. Some courses function primary as integrative reviews of the content from major courses. But some introduce entirely new theoretical material. Others focus on a specific problem in a attempt to develop practical applications of course material, thereby insuring true understanding. Still

others focus on groups of problems. Another direction these courses occasionally take is to focus on ethical matters. Yet another direction is to prepare seniors for the "real world" in various ways, from teaching resume writing and interview preparation to teaching etiquette and social graces. Sometimes the "real world" is approached in conjunction with internships. At other times public performances or major research or position papers are involved. There are undoubtedly more variations of content for the senior capstone course than for any other common course taught by colleges and universities. Obviously, we can't do everything. What is the best approach? What should definitely be included, what is optional, and what is best left to other parts of the curriculum or even extra-curricular programs?

One way to begin to answer these questions is to come to some agreement as to the purpose of the senior seminar. Accordingly, this paper will examine a basic philosophical issue involved with purpose. The issue involves two opposites: closure, represented by the dome; and further exploration, represented by the spire. Both approaches have legitimate claims for a capstone course. Dickinson (1993) poses a similar question when he asks, "Should a capstone course "cap" the undergraduate experience, or should it function as a bridge to the world of beyond college?" (p. 215). Both are formidable tasks.

There is definitely a need for students to be able to pull together all the ideas presented in different courses and construct some sort of integrated, meaningful whole. No other single course is traditionally involved in this specific purpose, with the possible exception of communication theory. This "tying together" process not only serves to make sense of the discipline, but also serves as a path to ownership of the major. Yet, the college major is not, and should not be, the end of intellectual growth. To some degree each student must be equipped and

readied to launch out into new endeavors, using the college learning experience as a base. Learning is often said to raise more questions that it answers, and these questions will multiply as the graduate moves out from the academy.

So, what should be the emphasis of a capstone course, closure or further exploration? Can they both reasonably be accomplished in the time allotted? Since these goals seem to move in opposite directions, is one canceled out by including the other? If we are forced to choose between the two, which should be emphasized? Perhaps the answer to these questions and others is dependent on the curricular configuration of each major program.

THE CASE FOR INTELLECTUAL CONSOLIDATION

Apologetics

Practical Necessity. Because communication is such a broad field (discipline?), closure is crucial. Numerous authors of communication texts (Eg., Dance, 1982; Griffin 1997; Littlejohn, 1992, Stacks, Hickson, & Hill, 1991) have recognized the difficulties that this issue poses. McCall (1994) refers to the "fragmentation" and "poorly articulated sense of disciplinary identity and direction" (p. 3). However poorly organized, communication is being a recognized discipline in its own right (Trent, 1997), but it has borrowed heavily from other disciplines (English, psychology, sociology, social psychology, philosophy, linguistics, etc.) as well.

Not all of these disciplines use a common vocabulary, and when they do, they often use the vocabulary differently. When communication scholars borrow concepts from various disciplines in different contexts, confusion is the result. A notorious example is "information" as it is used in information theory. Furthermore, many concepts that sound alike are really quite different; for example, "constructivism" and "constructionism." As students go from class to

class and professor to professor (many times majors also require work in other departments, as does the Messiah College major), the confusion is compounded. Somewhere along the line, this "academic diversity" needs to be sorted out. What better place to make sure this is accomplished than in the senior capstone course?

Market Necessity. Students themselves desire and need a sense of "what we have learned." Few colleges require comprehensive examinations in the major to graduate. For those that do not, a review to revive the long-term memory would seem prudent. What ought every communication major know? Or more to the point, what ought every communication major retain upon graduation? This is what makes a communication major a "communication major." There should be both a body of knowledge and a set of skills that are distinctive and shared by all majors, or else the very label "communication major" is meaningless. Most students do desire to clarify this identity, if for no other purpose than social when someone asks them, "You were a communication major, what's that?" Also, most students want to be able to identify "what they got from college" other than just a diploma.

Semantic Necessity. Only integrated knowledge is meaningful. Just as words "interanimate" (Richards, 1965) themselves, so do ideas. The definition of a capstone course quoted above (Durel, 1993) emphasizes the idea of integration. Moreover, the importance of integration was the main theme of the important study done by the Association of American Colleges (1991a), which concluded that "the end of the major ought to be a time for integrating knowledge, concepts, and capacities from the different parts of students' learning experiences" (p. 11). The constructivist approach to communication would further validate this emphasis; in order for education to be truly meaningful, students must develop and organize cognitive systems which

will interpret raw data and turn it into information.

Pragmatic Necessity. Only integrated knowledge is useful. Application requires integration. In order to apply knowledge, one must be able to envision how that knowledge will affect unique, new situations. Our best tests are not those that ask students to recall events or situations by rote, but rather those that call for original thought and creativity. If students have mastered concepts, they should be able to apply them to situations with which they are unfamiliar. If they are unable to do this, we seriously question whether they have learned the concept.

Methodologies

Review. Intellectual consolidation can often be accomplished through review, which can take many forms. One method is to use a text that covers the scope of the field. Two different type of texts most often do this, one is the highbred introductory text and the other is a comprehensive theory text. A highbred introductory text might be introduced or reintroduced in the senior capstone, allowing the students themselves to fill in the details that they were taught in specific specialty courses. On the other hand, a theory text, written on a more sophisticated level might not only serve as a review, but could serve to thoroughly explore and relate in a sophisticated way material gleaned in other courses. Indeed, a number of schools--George Mason University (Decker, 1992), Northern Kentucky University (Proctor, 1993), and St. Mary's College, MD (Magner, 1992)--use their theory course as a senior capstone. However, this approach may be suspect. Perhaps because "a capstone" is mandated, some departments merely looked around for an existing course that could be "designated" as a capstone, with little rethinking of the content. More difficult theory texts, especially those like Littlejohn (1996) that are used on both the undergraduate and graduate level, introduce so much new material that they

could hardly be designated as review, and if they contain too many diverse topics, their integrative function might be called into question as well.

Another aspect of review may involve competence testing (Aitken & Neer, 1992; Wolff, 1993). Here the common courses required by the major--the core curriculum--are the focus of the capstone. Aitken & Neer list the following competencies that ought to be assessed: interpersonal, critical thinking, language, leadership, reading, oral communication, cultural appreciation, writing, decision-making, theoretical, and ethical and philosophical appreciation (pp. 272-274).

Senior Thesis. A number of schools require a senior thesis, though according to Hay (1992), the percentage is relatively small (8%). Undoubtedly many more senior capstones require shorter course papers. Some schools such as Messiah College, specifically require "integration" papers. In the case of Messiah College, students are specifically asked to review past textbooks and former class notes. Some colleges require research papers and other focus on case studies. In either case, the task might essentially be one of review and integration, depending on the specific directions for the assignment. Incidently, there is some recent controversy being generated in what constitutes a thesis or research paper in the context of electronic communication technology. Sudol (1993), in fact, has already said goodbye to "the monumental, unified, and authoritative research paper that represents the last throes of print technology" and is welcoming "specialized networks," "gathering information without creating a particular design for it" and electronic hypertext "that involves the reader in dialogue and making choices," (p. 8).

Problematics

Three major problems may emerge in the quest for intellectual consolidation. The first

occurs when the review function dominates the integration function. When this occurs we are left with a cheap rehash of content from other courses without an overall synthesis. Although there is undeniably value in aiding long term memory, an integrated review should do more. It should emphasize underlying principles, implications, and trends. It should conceptually relate, compare, and contrast different topics, theories, and research paradigms. Another problem that can occur during the process of intellectual consolidation is just the opposite of the first. It is possible to get so bogged down in abstruse philosophical excursions and abstract attempts at synthesis that the very subject matter being synthesized becomes obscure. This is the "general systems theory syndrome" where the vision becomes so enlarged that it completely betrays the discipline. Finally, in an attempt to avoid these two problems, a third problem is sometimes generated. Case studies can be very helpful in both assuring integration and guaranteeing focus. However, it is possible to become over-focused on a specific problem and get embroiled in the details of a problem which is outside of either the teacher's or students' area of expertise. A communication senior capstone should not become a course in environmental science, because the topic of the case study is "global warming." A full focus on communication must be maintained. The author has had a particular problem with this pitfall in the areas of ethics and religion.

THE CASE FOR INTELLECTUAL EXPANSION

Apologetics

Preparation for the "Real World" of Work. Perhaps the largest number of capstone courses have this purpose as a major goal. The terms "real world" and "work world" are used repeatedly. No doubt, part of this emphasis is generated by students themselves. According to Boyer (1987), thirty-five percent of college seniors worry a great deal about job prospects, while

another forty-six percent are "quite anxious"; and among liberal arts majors, "more than half ... step from the commencement line to the unemployment line" (pp. 267-269). Boyer, a staunch advocate of the liberal arts, urges colleges to take their obligation to help students get placed more seriously and help them "make the transition from the campus to the world of work" (p. 270). Furthermore, Boyer urges not only placement offices but academic departments to get involved.

Preparation for the Changing Communication World. Right now many of us are in the throes of figuring out how to include Powerpoint or Presentations instruction in the basic speaking course. This coming semester at Messiah College, public speaking classrooms will be equipped with computer projectors, and no training is being provided to either teachers or students. The stage is set for a credibility disaster. If we do not prepare our students for the communication technology of the future that is rushing towards us at an ever-increasing rate, we are setting students up for disaster as well. So what do we do? Do we give capstone seniors who have missed it instruction in Powerpoint and Presentations? Do we introduce them to video DVD-ROMs? Do we discuss the implications of recently passed legislation that has put HDTV on a definite short timetable? What about the changing nature of the discipline with the influence of feminist, Eastern, and ethnic ideas? What about changes in the scope of the discipline--the Speech Communication Association becomes the National Communication Association? How can we ignore these issues that make our texts and courses obsolete, sometimes before graduation? The communication world that our graduating seniors will live in will be vastly different from the communication world of today; we know this for sure because we already see the new technologies looming on the horizon. If we cannot teach the new technologies, at least

we ought to give our students the tools to learn the technologies when they do appear.

More immediately, there is a need to ready students for the communication job market of today. Especially at small colleges, this may be a problem. Do we, in fact, have all the current technology and resources that currently are being used by business and industry? Sometimes academics, especially from the humanities and liberal arts tradition, turn up their noses at "practical training"; but many times this "practical training" is a prerequisite to an entry level position. If we do not offer practical preparation for entering the job market in other courses, should we not at least make it available in the senior seminar?

Preparation of Citizenship. Many college curricula have instituted programs involving service to the community, following Boyer's (1987) declaration, "service constitutes a vital part of an undergraduate education" (p. 214). "Service learning" has become a catch phrase. The American Association of Colleges (1991a) urged teaching social responsibility and active participation in the culture, encouraging "an ethos of corrigibility" which will facilitate civil discourse, vital to "the coherence of a culture" (p. 13). The senior capstone can become a stepping stone into a life of civic dialogue and action. This is an ideal time to engage in timely, vital issues and projects that make at difference in our world, from the local level to the global community.

Another broader aspect of preparing students for citizenship involves ethical and spiritual guidance. If an ethics course does not exist in the curriculum, sometimes this is where it appears--in the senior capstone course. Messiah College makes ethics a major part of the present senior capstone, combining the unit on ethics with various case studies, including the videos *Marjoe* and *Talk Radio*. There are a number of ethics texts available; the author has used both Johannesen

(1996) and Jaksa & Pritchard (1994). Elon College has a most interesting capstone program called "Quest for Wholeness: Five Paths to Partnership," which combines ethical considerations with spiritual direction "drawing on Taoist and Confucian insights into the connectedness of all life" (Sullivan & Sullivan, 1994).

Methodologies

New Content. Some have suggested that the senior capstone should introduce primarily new content rather than simply review and integrate what has preceded. This is probably the case when a comprehensive, demanding theory course is used for the capstone. Another possibility for introducing new material is to turn to present trends and current philosophies. In the author's senior capstone, considerable time is spent discussing "postmodernism," a topic that is currently under hot debate at evangelical Christian colleges. As indicated earlier, philosophical ethics and spiritual/religious material might be introduced, depending on the heritage and identity of the college. Southwestern College in Kansas focuses on morality and responsibility by requiring two books, Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* and Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, which develop the ideas of a new paradigm and a partnership society (Findley, 1994). Still another approach would be to introduce students to criticism and critical studies. Finally, as mentioned previously, there is a pressing need to get students (and teachers) caught up with technological breakthroughs. This could take the form of discussing the social impact of impending technology or could possibly involve teaching computer communication software, designing home pages, etc.

Vocational professional Focus. Some of these programs seek to apply new knowledge gained during major course work, but many seem to go off in almost unrelated directions. The extreme of this case is illustrated by two colleges (Illinois State University and Johns Hopkins

University) that refer to their senior capstones as "dis-orientation." Unfortunately, such a name might indicate or encourage disjunction between the "academic world" and the "real work world," a natural tendency of students that does not need to be externally supported. The focus is supposed to be on connectedness, not on disjunction.

A number of capstones emphasize professional preparation by focusing on leadership. Purdue University's School of Technology has such a program, which provides students with "a vision for a successful and effective career in a leadership function" (Vandeveer, 1994, p. 103). The University of North Carolina at Wilmington's capstone is entitled "Leadership and Communication" and emphasizes leadership characteristics, ethics, and disciplines (Brunson & Comeaux, 1994). Sometimes special programs are set up outside of the major by another branch of the college; the Jepson School of Leadership Studies performs this function at the University of Richmond.

Some vocational/professional foci in senior capstones are practical in the extreme. Perhaps the extreme of the extreme is Marietta College in Marietta Ohio, which has instituted a program called "Wine, Dine, and How to Act Fine." In this course, put together by Student Life in conjunction with the Bernard P. McDonough Center for Leadership and Business, seniors learn manners (from Letitia Baldrige's *Guide to Executive Manners*), office etiquette, entertaining business clients, party planning, the fine art of conversation, international communications, airport etiquette, and executive communications. In addition, a required part of the course is a cocktail party and dinner attended by members of Marietta College's Presidents cabinet and local trustees (Gill-Jacobson & Blume, 1994). Another example of taking practicality to the extreme is Mississippi University for Women. This capstone course, referred to as "What you need to know

and probably didn't learn in college," includes such topics as resume writing and interviewing; personal finance; buying housing, food, clothing, transportation, and insurance; getting along with spouses, family, friends, and co-workers; social etiquette; traveling abroad; and avoiding embarrassment (Smith, 1994). Western Michigan University has a more modest program that simply prepares students for the first job, including the job interview; this course emphasizes practical skills such as dress, composure, and delivery (Mascolini, 1994).

Case Studies. This methodology was mentioned previously; whether it is considered intellectual consolidation or intellectual expansion depends on the emphasis given to the specific capstone course. If the emphasis is on *application* of principles, then we are primarily focusing on consolidation; on the other hand, if the emphasis is on the *issue s itself* , then we are primarily focusing on expansion. A number of schools focus their senior capstones on case studies, including Mercer University, Northern Kentucky University, and the United States Military Academy (West Point). In the case of Mercer, the senior capstone is part of the general education program and focuses on current "hot issues" (Brown & Chasteen, 1994). The Northern Kentucky University program combines case studies with position papers and group presentations (Prusank, Kelly, & Duran, 1994). At West Point one third of the time is spent on the analytical framework (from sociology) and two-thirds of the time is spent on the actual case study (in this particular case, a military topic) (Wattendorf, 1993). Case studies are usually very effective because they are relevant and engaging for the students. They can be quite integrative, if properly guided, and are ideal for a small seminar classroom situation.

Problematics

The Widening Gyre Breaks Away. Adding too much new material in the senior seminar

can end in conceptual overload for the students. Sometimes seminar professors are tempted to try to work into the course everything important that was left out of the major or the core of the major. This approach is simply unworkable, because within any major there is always more left out than included. Another cause of spinning out of control relates to trying not only to do too much, but trying to do too many different things. The author ran into this problem when he tried to review major core content; integrate the content with Christian doctrine; discuss communication ethics--including various philosophical systems; elaborate on postmodernism; deal with racial, ethnic, and diversity issues; process some current internships; and prepare the students for vocations and jobs. Unfortunately, in trying to cover so many topics, nothing was really done well.

The Gyre Turns Gyve. If the practical is overemphasized, the capstone may become petty or superficial. One would hope a capstone would have more content than pointers on manners, etiquette, and commuting to work. Even personally important topics such as spiritual growth, personal identity, and personal survival skills need to be eliminated as the focus of the senior capstone. Not that they cannot emerge in relation to a communication topic, but they should not be the focus of the capstone itself. Even seemingly important case studies can become trivialized and irrelevant if communication principles and practices are ignored.

The Capstone Jumps the Field Fence. Unless the senior capstone is a general education or interdisciplinary course, care needs to be taken to stay within the boundaries of the discipline. Not everything is communication. Economic inequities among social classes, public policy regarding the environment, and the physics of global warming are not communication issues in themselves, though their public discourse surely is. Take another example, there are a lot of

important communication aspects related to the "woman's choice/right to life" debate; however, if the analysis gets bogged down in a debate as to exactly when human life begins, the focus loses both its relevance to communication and to the real life of the student. Of course, a rhetorical analysis and critique of the debate concerning when human life begins might be very appropriate for a communication capstone. Getting off the subject is more easy in the senior capstone than any other course. This is especially true if the course is conducted in a seminar format (perhaps the best type of class for such a course). The author has on a number of occasions gotten sidetracked on issues of theology and diversity, related to communication only tangentially.

HAVING YOUR CAKE AND EATING IT TOO

Consolidation and Expansion.

Is consolidation and expansion possible in one course? Most of the literature from professional educators, including the various reports from the Association of American Colleges indicates that such a combined effort is desirable. In fact, students and everyone else are continually going through these two processes. Like the chicken and the egg, it is difficult to tell which comes first; in order to expand intellectually, you need to have a base of knowledge to work from that is arrived at through intellectual consolidation; conversely, in order to consolidate intellectually, you need diverse constructs that are arrived at through intellectual expansion. Yet, the senior seminar is limited, and perhaps we need to emphasize one, hoping that the other will follow after graduation.

Whether or not both intellectual consolidation and expansion can occur in one course will depend on the communication major--its content, its organization, its coordination, and its execution. In many cases, because of deficiencies in the elements cited, only an adequate job in

consolidation can be hoped for. Consolidation is vital in many programs that take a cafeteria approach to the major. There is an entry point and exit point, but all course offerings in the middle are basically disciplinary electives, with no discernable sequence and few prerequisites. This sort of curricular arrangement is common in small colleges where limited numbers of both students and faculty make scheduling major courses problematic. Typically courses are scheduled for a single semester and offered every other year. This allows the college to offer enough different courses to present a legitimate looking major. However, this also forces students to take courses "when they can get them" and not when the sequence makes sense from an educational point of view. The college, of course, recognizes this and therefore designates no prerequisites. Moreover, to increase course selection, "Topics" courses are frequently offered, changing from one year to the next, further exacerbating the problem of continuity in the major.

Domes with Spires

Ideally, we should be able to enter into both intellectual consolidation and expansion in the senior capstone course. But in the case of the small college, we may need to focus on consolidation, in preparation for the expansion that will hopefully take place in the work world after graduation. To the extent that seniors have already entered the work world or have had courses which have served to consolidate knowledge, such as an integrative communication theory course, the emphasis can shift toward expansion.

Finally, there are five practical steps than can be taken, even at small colleges, that will facilitate both consolidation and expansion in the capstone course. First, the major should have a complementary entry course that prepares students for the entire major. Second, students should be required to keep all textbooks and all notes from major courses, or at least from core courses

required of all majors. Third, all majors should be required to take as part of their core a survey course, other than the capstone, that integrates various elements of the discipline. Typically this course is communication theory (assuming "theory" includes humanistic and critical approaches). Fourth, all teachers should have the syllabi of all courses in the major curriculum so that they are fully aware of how their particular class relates to material being taught in other classes. This will enable faculty to facilitate integration in a gradual, natural way as they teach each individual course. Fifth, all students should be required to do an internship. They will virtually all be required to obtain jobs after graduation, so if they qualify to graduate, they should qualify for an internship. Some (Messiah College) have sought to keep the requirements for entering an internship higher than that of graduation, but this seems to make little sense. These young people will represent the school whether they are interns or graduates.

If the above guidelines are followed, perhaps even the majority of small colleges, with the cafeteria or "Ferris wheel" (Dickinson, 1993) approach, can build a major structure that is topped by a hybrid Byzantine "onion" dome, common in traditional Russian architecture, the dome with a spire and the spire with a dome (Rogov, 1979).

A Final Concern

This paper has only considered the major capstone course, which seeks to integrate and apply elements within the major. There are also school-wide capstones (Mercer University, Southwestern College, Bunker Hill Community College) that seek to integrate the entire curricular and extracurricular educational experiences. This raises even further questions: (1) Should there be two capstones--one for the major only, and one for the total college experience? (2) Should there just be one total capstone that encompasses the major? (3) Should there just be

the major capstone that takes into account the total college experience (Wolff, 1993)? (4) As colleges seek to save money by lowering credit-hour requirements for graduation, are capstone courses luxuries we cannot afford in the context of a continuously impoverished curriculum in a world of increasingly expanding and accessible knowledge?

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